

Coronet

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Camacho Comes Through

by IRVING WALLACE



Avila Camacho—soldier and president—is the man whom we can thank for booting the Nazis clean out of Mexico

WHEN HEFTY, phlegmatic Manuel Avila Camacho, known as “The Double Chin,” became President of Mexico in December, 1940, his hopes of creating honest pro-United States sentiment among his people seemed very slight.

This may come as a shock to most good-natured Americans who feel that everyone in the hemisphere should love them. Well, Mexicans didn't. At least not until Camacho became President and began selling them on Pan-Americanism, Democracy, Solidarity and F.D.R.

The transformation, resulting from Camacho's super-salesmanship, is now regarded as no less than a miracle by those who know their Latin. Yet today, after confiscating almost a billion dollars' worth of property belonging to Axis nationals, Mexico stands defiant as the twenty-eighth nation to declare war on tyranny and dictatorship.

Before Camacho came into power, however, the activities of Hitler agents and Jap missions in and around Mexico City were scandalous. The Nazis, especially, had a fertile field. They knew Mexicans possessed a handful of outdated half-forgotten hates against the United States which Uncle Sam had never bothered to heal. So, with instructions from Berlin and funds from Mexico's German merchants, the Nazis began to bombard bewildered peons through press and radio with lurid reminders of previous Yankee crimes.

*President Comacho*

Germany. Thus in World War I, President Carranza, goading his people into being pro-German, permitted Germans to use Mexico City as a base for intrigue and sabotage against the United States, and even plotted with Germans to invade Texas itself via San Antonio and Laredo!

Recent German activities below the Rio Grande were merely carbon copies.

Nazis put the exclamation mark after the worst of old American activities below the border. Mexicans were reminded of their 'teen-aged cadets who were slaughtered defending Chapultepec Castle against General Winfield Scott's invading United States troops in 1847. They remembered that Ambassador Henry Lane Wilson, of the United States, aided in the plot to murder Mexico's great liberator, Francisco Madero, in 1913.

Nazi propaganda did not neglect the entrance of the United States Navy into Vera Cruz in 1914, when that port was smashed and hammered because Mexicans refused to salute the Star Spangled Banner. Mexicans were then informed that America's Ambassador to Mexico, Josephus Daniels, had been the man who, as Secretary of the Navy in 1914, sent the boats against Vera Cruz.

Naturally, under this barrage, the masses of Mexico wilted. Memories became vivid. Old hates returned. Down with the gringo Yankee!

All the while he toiled under Cardenas, Avila Camacho watched what was happening to his people. And as a practical politician, he realized that Mexico's place was with, not against,

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Uncle Sam. After the stormy 1940 election, his chance came.

AS PRESIDENT, the moderate, conservative Avila Camacho suddenly struck back. He banned Nazi newspapers, and cut Nazis off the air. He squashed the anti-Semitic Gold Shirts of Monterey and purged fifth columnists in key positions. He washed his hands of the Nazis and extended a hearty handclasp to Roosevelt.

Some of the Nazi-influenced Mexicans tried to resist. Many trudged the backhills, breeding-ground of revolutions, passing out the printed propaganda of Herr Goebbels which stated that all Mexicans were of exactly the same Nordic race as the Germans. But Camacho himself stepped in and exposed the Nordic brotherhood nonsense. He produced a photostat of an official Nazi Party letter from Berlin which dismissed a high Nazi official "because he is married to a person of a lower and second-class race, a Mexican!"

Thus the Nazi fifth column in Mexico was blocked in every move by the imposing figure of the President himself.

Fortunately for us, the vast majority of Mexicans listened to their solid President. In the past, American goodwill propaganda in the hands of visiting movie stars and Congressmen had not nearly matched Nazi technique. But Camacho, pinch-hitting for the United States, sold Mexico on our friendship.

Camacho recently stated, "The Nazi fifth column is no longer a problem. Today, our best defense against fifth columnists is to be found in the deep-rooted democratic sense of the Mexican people. Supported by my citizens, I look to President Roosevelt and to the United States for a fruitful friendship and a frank collaboration against all world enemies of peace and of liberty!"

But it wasn't until a 4,000 ton Mexican tanker was mercilessly torpedoed off Florida, resulting in the death of 14 seamen, that Camacho whipped capital and labor into a united frenzy that shattered the windows and plots of Mexico City's powerful German Club and exploded Latin America's second largest nation into total war.

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Certainly, at this time, Uncle Sam could not have found a more trustworthy friend than the President of Mexico. In three decades of public life, in a nation ridden with graft, Camacho has never been known to take a dishonest penny or to sell out on anyone for personal gain.

THIS is almost unique in Mexico. The political scene shifts with such speed that there have been 104 "official" revolutions in 100 years. Thus army men or politicians in favor get what they can—while they can. It was one-armed President Alvaro Obregon who, following his election, made the classic crack, "I am better for Mexico because with only one arm I can't steal as much as the others!"

Naturally it was a pleasant surprise for the population to learn that Avila Camacho, after holding a half dozen big-time military jobs (he was a Brigadier General at 27), listed his total personal assets, upon becoming President, as amounting to a mere \$7,410. And today he has little more. Mexico—and the United States—know they have an honest and industrious man.

As a youngster, Camacho studied to be a bookkeeper. But in 1914 Mexico shook with revolt, and Camacho, aged 17, left his ledgers to join the insurgent army of General Medina in the successful fight against Huerta.

For six years Avila Camacho fought on the field, and somehow was always on the winning side. He made the army his career, bringing with him a strange talent. The army soon learned that Camacho the strong, the silent, was the perfect compromiser, the best arbiter of disputes in the land. So, using words instead of swords, he rose to fame.

For example in 1927, during the Cristero Rebellion, Camacho strode, unarmed, into a saloon that harbored the enemy and within sixty minutes had their pledge to surrender. Again in 1929, at Michoacan, Avila Camacho flew to the scene of trouble, sat down with twelve enemy generals and arranged a happy peace.

HE WENT to the top fast. He was soon Chief of Staff of the Ministry of War under President Rodriguez, making radical army reforms. Next, under

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President Cardenas, Camacho was made the Secretary of National Defense, when he drove his colleagues crazy with tireless demands for American-built airplanes and a swift-moving mechanized army. In 1938, after he suppressed the bandit leader, Cerdillo, Avila Camacho was awarded the highest job in the Mexican Army—that of Division General.

Nevertheless, when General Avila Camacho ran for President, his enemies laughed. They pointed to his colorless military record. They ignored his years as an arbiter and bitterly labeled him “El Soldado Desconocido” or “The Unknown Soldier.” Crueler enemies called him “The Virgin Sword.”

In the big election which saw over 400 killed, Avila Camacho, backed by the million members of the Confederation of Mexican workers, defeated wealthy General Juan Almazan. When told he had lost sixteen to one, General Almazan threatened a revolution. But when the United States promptly recognized Camacho’s election, Almazan closed shop and Mexico presented a united front behind the winner.

Proof of the country’s unity came recently on the occasion of the 132nd anniversary of Mexico’s revolt against Spain. On a platform before the presidential palace, Camacho joined six living past Presidents to stand shoulder to shoulder as a demonstration that old political animosities had at last been buried. 40,000 voices responded to the sight with a mighty “*Viva Méjico!*”

Today, with all the Americas threatened, Camacho works hard and long. He is up every morning at six. After puffing through vigorous setting-up exercises, he goes for a short horseback ride. He returns for breakfast and, while he eats, the latest newspapers and political flashes are read aloud to him.

Next, he lights one of the four Cuban cigars he will smoke during the day—he used to smoke 20—slides into his new American-made sedan and is driven the four miles to the heart of Mexico City.

In his office, with background music from his radio, Camacho puts in strenuous hours. He starts at nine and goes hard until three-thirty. Then the

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traditional siesta. After that, he works again from five to nine in the evening.

Personally, Camacho is a good Catholic and a good husband. He has two adopted sons, aged 14 and 17. Among the things he enjoys most are chewing gum, watching American newsreels in his own living room, wearing conservative American-tailored suits (he owns 30 suits, half of them made in the U.S.A.) and his 50 thoroughbred horses. His pride, a \$10,000 beauty named Peacock, was a sensation in the 1940 New York horse show. Camacho is a three-goal polo player—his team won third in the 1936 Olympics—and his pet polo mare is named Lady Hitchcock, after his friend, Tommy Hitchcock.

But Avila Camacho's most remarkable personal qualities are his tenacity and courage.

They tell of the time, 18 years ago, when Camacho was leading a group of soldiers against rebels. The rebels, with greater forces, captured his entire band. Their leader offered Camacho and his officers their liberty if he would promise never to take up arms against them again. When he refused, the rebel leader threatened to have Camacho shot.

Camacho merely shrugged, "Very well, then," he said. "Execute me."

The startled rebel stared for a long moment before he said: "You are a blockhead, but a brave one. Go!"

That is typical of the stories they tell about Camacho. They say he would die before giving up something he believes in. And we in the United States can thank our stars there's a man in Mexico like him—leading his people in a fight we all believe in.

One of the things that impressed Irving Wallace most about Mexico was the National Lottery, which nets the government over a million a year for charity. But his first enthusiasm was Camacho, whom he admired for his honesty and his shrewd policy of cooperation with Uncle Sam. As a writer Wallace is a personality specialist, and his list of subjects includes such lights as Premier Tojo, Diego Rivera and Bette Davis. At present he is a member of the First Motion Picture Unit of the Army Air Force, where he works in the writing division.

—Suggestions for further reading:

INSIDE LATIN AMERICA

by John Gunther

\$3.50

Harper & Brothers, New York

OldMagazineArticles.com

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MEXICO REBORN

by Verna C. Millan \$3.00

Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston

REPORTAGE ON MEXICO

by Virginia Prewett \$3.00

E. P. Dutton & Company, Inc., New York

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